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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to teach empathy and language awareness to her middle school students when a limited-English-proficient student entered her class, a teacher conducted an experiment in which she began each class in French. Student bewilderment became appreciation, and a class discussion of foreign language learning ensued. The students unanimously agreed to learn some French in the context of familiar daily grammar exercises. The teacher's approach was to model supportive, non-judgmental response to the students' efforts and build on their existing foundation in English grammar, using some language switching. Key instructional features in this successful experiment were identified: comprehensible input; short periods of second language exposure; and a non-threatening, esteem-building atmosphere. (MSE)

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Trading Places; Walking in Their Shoes

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Trading Places; Walking in Their Shoes

Amidst the dog days of summer, new and exciting learning opportunities await as children happily renew acquaintances at the initial sound of a fresh school year's bell. Abounding with anticipation, students and teachers scurry to class anxious to meet the unknown challenges lying ahead. The final bell rings, and students readily respond to roll call in order to make that all important first impression except for one. For in the middle of an energetic enthusiastic class sits a totally silent unfamiliar Hispanic face. Unknowingly, his sparkling, dark, brown eyes and radiant smile captivate his peers who fix their sights on him as does a predator on its unsuspecting prey. Breaking the overshadowing silence, cruel comments such as 'What's the matter'? 'Cat got your tongue.' emanate from all corners of the classroom. Sensitively, the teacher calmly responds to her students' remarks with, 'He can't answer. He doesn't speak English.' Embarrassment and shame now replace the earlier impermeable silence.

How many times do we as mainstream teachers encounter scenarios similar to this during the course of a school year? For many of us, such classroom encounters elicit frustration and helplessness. Yet in this day and age when inclusion is a

driving force geared to provide equal educational opportunities for bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the mainstream, teachers must learn to combat their anxiety as well as that of their students. Fortunately we have a virtual arsenal of proven instructional strategies like cooperative and collaborative learning from which to draw. However all the teaching modalities in the world have thus far failed, in my opinion, to address one prevalent problem. How does the average mainstream teacher instill sensitivity in her native English speaking students toward their struggling bilingual or ESL counterparts?

Due to dramatic societal and economic changes during the past thirty years, molding students psychologically and emotionally is probably the most difficult task facing us today. As a result, we have more impact on the lives of all our students than ever before and face some of the greatest challenges one of which is acculturation on both sides. What does that mean? What are the implications of such an overbearing task? Altruistically speaking, if we are to prepare our students to compete in this global economy of ours and be productive contributors, then a sincere effort to heighten consciousness across the board

regarding the linguistic barriers of the bilingual and ESL student is imperative. But how?

Facing this dilemma as a mainstream middle level language arts instructor, I sought an answer. Believing that experience is a far better teacher than I proved to be crucial in my quest. Traditional linguistic philosophy primarily focuses on bilingual or ESL students acquiring English, and the difficulties they face. However, what about the other side of the coin? What would happen if native speaking English mainstream students suddenly found themselves in the shoes of their ESL peers? How would they react to a classroom environment void of their primary language? How would they feel?

Being a French major afforded me the opportunity to initiate this very simulation. I began my experiment by speaking fluent French at the beginning of each class. My native speaking English students did not know what to make of my unexpected language change. Bewilderment enveloped the classroom like a thick pea soup fog. Faint mutterings asking 'What is she saying?', or 'Is she for real?' came from everyone except from my mainstream ESL students. Somehow I think they understood what I was doing and why. They reacted with smiles, not to be insensitive, but to let me know that they appreciated their

mainstream peers' sudden frustration. After about ten minutes, I stopped, looked at my students, and asked, "How do you feel?" Overwhelmingly, the students told me how lost and confused they felt. From their initial reactions, my experiment succeeded. In just a few minutes, my mainstream students experienced their ESL peers' apprehension regarding new language introduction first hand. An interesting discussion ensued in which they expressed a rudimentary understanding of exactly how difficult learning a foreign language must be. Their comments focused on the premise that since English was the only language with which they were familiar, they believed everyone knew how to speak it. Moreover, they seemed to equate knowing English with intelligence. It became obvious to me that my students needed exposure to more than just how to write an essay. Inadvertently, they stumbled across the fact that many native English speaking students do not encounter second language learning opportunities until high school. Therefore, expecting them to comprehend and empathize with the ESL students' linguistic plight any earlier is unreasonable. For how can anyone truly understand someone else's experience unless he or she has walked in their shoes? Yet, like so many mainstream teachers, I falsely assumed they could. Therefore not only did my assimilation foster a new awareness

among my students, but for me, it reinforced an often forgotten axiom, 'Do not assume anything.'

With this in mind and my students' curiosity about second language acquisition peaked, I asked them if they wanted to learn some French. The class's decision was unanimous. However, I needed to find a way to integrate French minimally but meaningfully into an already comprehensive Language Usage curriculum. Consequently, I chose to teach my students the appropriate French responses to their Daily Oral Language activity, a grammar based editing exercise. First, I taught them to listen carefully to the questions I asked in French. Once they understood the questions, they were ready to learn the answers. I pointed to various parts of the sentences containing errors and taught them how to say the corrections in French; thus, employing a form of a Total Physical Response (TPR) activity. After much practice and repetition, my students slowly began to supply the appropriate responses to the appropriate questions. At no time during their oral participation did I unduly criticize them or degrade their accents. After all, perfection was not important. What was important was their willingness to take a chance and try something totally different and unfamiliar in front of their

classmates. As a means of motivation, I first complimented the student's effort and then modeled the response's pronunciation by correctly repeating what the student said. In so doing, the student felt secure in his or her attempt and still gained gentle coaching through positive reinforcement. Needless to say, my native English speaking students gravitated to learning their new second language, like paper clips to a magnet, picking it up quickly. As for my ESL students, they enjoyed the experience immensely because everyone, for at least the first few minutes of every class period, was on the same page. No one had the edge. No longer did they bear the burden of being the only ones who did not understand; for, no one did. Everyone was learning together.

Reflecting on my avant-garde approach to generating sensitivity among my mainstream students toward their ESL peers reminds me of several key instructional aspects to any second language acquisition. First, I gave my students messages they understood. By using a familiar daily language activity, my native English speaking students were easily able to transfer from their primary language, English, to their secondary language, French. Moreover because the activity was grammar based, and the students had a sound understanding of grammatical structure, according to Stephen Krashen, "their language organs

generalized rules from verbal stimuli, not empirically, but 'according to innate principles' of universal grammar." (Crawford, 1993) Hence, the students were able to extract meaning from the activity regardless of the language. Second, I submerged them in French for only short bits of time while still maintaining English. Vacillating between languages made comprehensible input of French possible because of an already established English foundation. Although English was the primary language during the simulation, Jim Cummins's comprehensible input theory pans out. (Crawford, 1993) Therefore, it does not matter what language is primary or secondary, the results are the same depending on how sound the foundation is of the primary language. (Baker, 1993) Unfortunately, mainstream teachers often forget this fundamental premise when assisting ESL students. Third, to ignore the roles of affective domain and affective filter in any second language acquisition experience is to totally disregard the students emotionally. Learning a second language is risky business under the best of circumstances; thus, fostering and maintaining a nonthreatening self-esteem building academic climate is imperative. Bearing this in mind, I never sacrificed an anxiety free classroom environment for flawless responses by over criticizing my students' attempts. (Richard-

Amato, 1988) Since my goal was to promote sensitivity among my students, striving for second language perfection would only undermine my efforts. In addition, keeping my mainstream students' affective filters to a minimum allowed for maximum language acquisition. Thus, their knowledge of French improved with time and practice; as, their initial anxiety ceased, and their self-confidence rose. By trading places, my native English speaking students experienced a sneak preview of what their ESL classmates view in full while gaining sensitivity for their struggle.

Frequently, we as mainstream teachers focus too much on the differences between our mainstream students and our mainstream ESL students. Therefore, we must remember that all language acquisition is an ongoing process requiring nurturing and patience. Consequently, it is not a matter of how many homeruns our students score, but that they are willing to step up to bat at all.

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